



Weekly

13

OCT
6:33 UTC

MENA Weekly Summary - October 6 - October 12, 2021

Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. These include a landmine explosion in Algeria that wounded two civilians, tensions in Jerusalem surrounding prayer rights at the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount compound, the exacerbation of the electricity crisis in Lebanon, the foiling of an imminent IS-linked attack in Morocco's Tangier, the continuation of talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a VBIED attack targeting the governor of Aden in Yemen.

October 6 - October 12, 2021

- A landmine explosion in **Algeria's** Tebessa Province wounded two civilians
- Tensions surrounding Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount compound were elevated in **Israel & the Palestinian Territories**
- The electricity crisis in **Lebanon** worsened, with a temporary nationwide blackout being recorded
- Security forces in **Morocco** dismantled a five-member IS-linked cell in Tangier, thwarting an 'imminent' plot
- Talks aimed at mending ties between **Iran** and **Saudi Arabia** continued
- An explosive-rigged vehicle exploded near the convoy of the STC-linked governor of Aden in **Yemen**

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

A map of the Middle East and North Africa region. Countries are color-coded: blue for the focus of the report (Algeria, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Yemen) and grey for other regional countries (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates). The Gaza Strip is specifically labeled.

Algeria

Notable developments:

1. On October 9, a landmine explosion in Tebessa Province's El Mezerra wounded two civilians.
2. Unconfirmed reports indicate that a similar explosion wounding one civilian was recorded in Batna

Province on October 8.

ANALYSIS: The recently reported incidents come amid infrequent landmine and IED attacks in Algeria, with only three previous similar incidents having taken place this year. The deadliest of these was recorded on January 14, when five civilians were killed, and three others wounded, in a landmine explosion in Tebessa Province. These attacks, likely aimed at security forces, highlight the continued presence of militants in northeastern Algeria, especially along the Tunisian border. The mountainous territory in this region enables militants to hide and move with relative ease. The October 9 attack was most likely conducted by AQIM. This is because AQIM is known to operate in the region and has conducted and claimed similar attacks in the past. Following the January 14 attack, AQIM issued a statement claiming responsibility for the landmine attack, labeling it a “defensive measure” against security forces. Given that AQIM derives support from civilians and is dependent on them for logistical support, the group generally does not seek to harm locals and prefers to primarily target security forces. However, since landmines are victim-operated, civilians are often wounded or killed as collateral damage. Therefore, the use of such explosive devices indicates that AQIM is willing to risk such collateral damage to maintain a foothold in Algeria. Similar incidents are possible over the coming weeks as security forces are likely to conduct patrols in the area to identify additional landmines planted by militants.

Israel & Palestinian Territories

Notable developments:

1. On October 6, an Israeli court effectively ruled that silent prayer by Jewish worshippers is permitted at the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound in Jerusalem’s Old City. The verdict was announced after an observant Jewish Israeli contested a ban imposed by the police on his visit to the religious site.
2. The decision drew widespread criticism from several Arab nations and Palestinian militant factions, with Hamas stating on October 7 that it constituted “a clear declaration of a war”.
3. On October 8, the Jerusalem District Court overturned the previous ruling and reinstated the ban on Jewish prayer at the holy site.

ANALYSIS: Developments in Jerusalem, particularly matters related to the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound, have historically been a significant source of tension between Israelis and Palestinians. This is due to the city’s religious importance in both Islam and Judaism as well as the fact that both Israelis and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital. The October 6 ruling exacerbated these tensions as it altered the status quo whereby Jewish worshippers were permitted to enter the site without being allowed to pray there. Within this context, the court’s reversal of the previous ruling is likely an attempt to de-escalate tensions due to security concerns. The reversal slightly lowered the risk of potential hostilities with Gaza-based militant factions. However, tensions in Jerusalem over other issues remain, as illustrated by clashes between Israeli forces and local Palestinians in and around Jerusalem’s Old City. Overall, events in Jerusalem will remain a trigger for future regional tensions.

Lebanon

Notable developments:

1. On October 10, Lebanon's two largest power generation plants resumed operations after a nationwide blackout on October 9.
2. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) transferred six million liters of diesel from its reserves to Lebanon's state electricity company. The supplies are estimated to last for three days.
3. On October 11, a fuel tank caught fire at the al-Zahani facility. The fire was contained in the hours following the incident.

ANALYSIS: The LAF's provision of diesel highlights the authorities' prioritization of immediate emergency measures to mitigate the crisis. However, these measures will only allow the country's power plants to remain operational for a limited period. Moreover, the October 11 fire underscores the vulnerability of the energy infrastructure, which is liable to worsen Lebanon's already dire electricity crisis. In the coming days, electricity rationing measures and intermittent blackouts will likely be experienced. The prolongment of power outages will likely lead to panic buying of essential supplies. This will further exacerbate the already significant risk for armed clashes at fuel stations, grocery stores, and similar facilities. Moreover, criminal elements may perceive that the LAF's measure has caused a shortage of fuel at its disposal, which may impact its operational capabilities. This is liable to create the perception of a power vacuum, encouraging criminal elements to engage in illicit activities. The risk of unrest also remains high as these developments will likely inflame existing anti-government sentiments among the Lebanese populace. The security environment will thus remain precarious across Lebanon over the coming weeks.

Morocco

Notable developments:

1. The Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ) dismantled a five-member Islamic State (IS)-linked cell in simultaneous raids in Tangier on October 6. It stated that it thwarted an "imminent" militant plot.
2. The cell was in possession of sharp cutters, flat tools, a sword, numerous bottles of various sizes containing nitric acid, a large quantity of nails, electrical wires, and six small gas cylinders.

ANALYSIS: The BCIJ conducts periodic operations targeting IS-linked cells across Morocco, including Tangier. However, these cells are rarely in possession of explosive-making materials. The fact that the militants had acquired the necessary chemicals and tools required to construct explosive devices indicates that they were likely in the latter stages of planning an attack. One of the suspects' training as an electrical engineer indicates that the cell would have likely been able to construct explosive devices within a shorter span of time and of a higher quality. The leader of the cell had established contact with IS leaders in the Sahel region to receive financial and other assistance, which indicates that the plot was not hastily planned and that the members of the cell were

careful about the details to ensure its smooth execution and success. The discovery of nails suggests that the cell was planning a high-casualty attack as IEDs that are packed with nails are specifically designed to increase the amount of shrapnel released by the explosion. The foiled plot underscores the underlying risk of militancy in Morocco, including in major cities. The BCIJ will thus conduct further raids targeting IS-linked militants across Morocco in the coming months.

Saudi Arabia & Iran

Notable developments

On October 8, Iranian Foreign Minister (FM) Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated that talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia aimed at long-term reconciliation are “on the right track,” but “more dialogue” is needed.

Analysis: This development follows confirmation on October 3 by Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, that Saudi Arabia and Iran held their first direct diplomatic talks with the new Iranian government on September 21. This constituted the fourth round of talks since April between the two nations, thus underscoring their increased effort to mend ties. Saudi Arabia and Iran view each other as regional rivals, with both seeking regional hegemony. The rivalry can broadly be attributed to religious and ideological divergences due to Saudi Arabia’s Sunni Islam affiliation, while Iran follows Shia Islam. Riyadh remains deeply suspicious of Iran and the threat it poses. However, its decision to embrace these talks, which remain at a nascent stage, could be partially in response to a perceived decrease in support from Washington for the Kingdom’s national security amid the US redeployment of its military assets from Saudi Arabia. This has likely prompted the Kingdom to de-escalate tensions with Iran to compensate for Washington’s waning support. Saudi Arabia’s keenness to engage with Iran may also be attributed to the war against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, which manifests in persistent cross-border attacks into Saudi territory. Riyadh may hope that warmer relations with Iran will reduce these hostilities. Further rapprochement steps between the two countries are likely to be recorded. However, due to the depth of their disagreements, tensions are unlikely to abate completely in the near future.

Yemen

Notable Developments

1. An explosive-rigged car exploded near the convoy of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC)-linked Aden’s Governor, Ahmed Lamlas, in Aden’s Al-Tahawi on October 10.
2. At least six individuals were killed and 11 others were wounded. The governor and Agriculture Minister Salem Al-Socotri survived the attack.

ANALYSIS: While politically motivated assassinations attacks are frequently recorded in

Aden, the targeting of high-ranking government officials is less common. This attack comes amid heightened tensions between STC-linked forces and Hadi government-affiliated local actors across southern Yemen, primarily in Aden. Moreover, Lamlas, who is also the secretary-general of the STC, has been reportedly involved in political tensions with the Hadi-led government over complete control of Aden. Thus, Hadi government-affiliated forces including the al-Islah Party, a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, may have conducted the latest attack to undermine the STC leadership. This is bolstered by the elevated antagonism between STC and al-Islah Party, given that the STC's main backer, the UAE, is hostile towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Alternatively, the involvement of jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), cannot be completely ruled out as the group retains a limited operational foothold in southern Yemen. Regardless, the modus operandi of this attack indicates that the perpetrators were likely tracking the convoy's movements, which shows their relatively high intelligence-gathering and coordination capabilities. This highlights major gaps in security protocols, including around high-ranking government officials in Aden. Similar high-profile attacks are liable to recur in Aden over the coming months.



Other Developments

- **Bahrain:** Protesters gathered in the vicinity of the Israeli Embassy in Manama on October 8 to protest its inauguration and normalization between Bahrain and Israel.
- **Iraq:** Parliamentary elections were held on October 10 in Iraq, with a turnout of 41 percent voter turnout recorded. This represents the lowest voter turnout since 2003. Multiple incidents of violence were reported at the polling stations.

- **Israel & UAE:** A visa exemption agreement between Israel and the UAE came into effect on October 10, permitting visa-free travel between the two countries. Israeli citizens traveling to the UAE for tourism or business purposes no longer need visas.
- **Lebanon & Iran:** During a diplomatic visit to Lebanon on October 7, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, offered to build two power plants in Beirut within 18 months and stated Iran is ready to rebuild the Port of Beirut.
- **Libya:** Domestic flights from al-Abraq International Airport and Benina International Airport were suspended on October 10 following reports of a sit-in over delayed salary payments.
- **Saudi Arabia & Yemen:** A Houthi-launched explosive-laden unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was intercepted by Saudi air defense systems on October 7. The falling debris shattered the facades of Abha International Airport, wounding four airport workers.
- **Turkey:** Turkey's National Intelligence Organization arrested six foreign citizens on October 8 in Istanbul, Antalya for "political and military espionage". Unconfirmed reports indicate that those arrested were Russian nationals.

The Upcoming Week

- **October 12-16:** Educators employed on private, contractual bases are slated to hold a nationwide strike in **Morocco**. The teachers are planning to hold demonstrations at unspecified times in **Rabat** between October 14-15. The labor action is being held to demand the integration of contractual teachers into the public education system.
- **October 14:** Liberation Day will be observed nationwide in **Yemen** to commemorate the start of the Radfan Uprising against British rule in 1963. Public offices, banks, and private businesses will likely be closed due to the public holiday.
- **October 15:** Women's rights activists have announced that the annual "Slut Walk" will take place in central **Israel's** Tel Aviv. The event will be held at 09:00 (local time) at Atarim Square. It is being held to bring attention to gender-based violence and support victims of sexual assault.
- **October 15:** Evacuation Day will be observed in **Tunisia** to commemorate the final evacuation of the last French forces from Tunisia's Bizerte in 1963. Public offices, banks, and private businesses will likely be closed due to the public holiday.

- **October 15:** The Martyrdom of Hasan al-Askari will be commemorated as a public holiday nationwide in **Iran**. This holiday commemorates the death anniversary of the eleventh Imam in Shiite Islam, Hasan al-Aksari in 846 AD.
- **October 17:** The Moroccan Social Front announced that International Day for the Eradication of Poverty will be observed in several cities across **Morocco**. The civil society organization reportedly stated that sit-ins will be held in unspecified locales in response to worsening socioeconomic conditions in the country.
- **October 17-21:** The annual GITEX consumer computer and electronics tradeshow, exhibition, and conference will take place at the UAE's Dubai World Trade Center.
- **October 18-21:** The anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Mohammed will be commemorated across the **MENA** region. The holiday will likely result in the closure of public offices, banks, and private businesses and cause interruptions to travel due to nationwide commemorative events.